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Hard Conversations, Healthy Conversations: How to Respond When Tragedy Strikes

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Hard Conversations, Healthy Conversations



How to respond when tragedy strikes

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Don't forget to complete the session evaluation!



**31st Annual
National Youth-At-Risk Conference**

V

Victoria Dawkins
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Presenter

K

Katherine Quinnell
Athens State University
Presenter

C

Clista Clanton
University of South Alabama
Presenter

Surveys



Session Evaluation

Photos



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Why are you here?

Themes of Hard Conversations

- Traumatic
- Timing
 - Sudden?
 - Expected?
- Impacts all involved or present
- Rarely able to feel adequately prepared

Challenges of Dealing with Distressing Events

- Information spreads quickly and is not always correct
- Children and adolescents struggle to understand mortality
 - Comprehension varies based on factors such as development, culture, religion, etc
- We have our own reactions/grief
- Teachers/ school personnel often have to make decisions in the moment
 - Parents question choices later
- Knowing where the line is between what the school should say and what should be left for family

Supporting Students and Families

- Listen
 - Be present in the conversation
- Be Honest/Authentic
 - We sense when people are hiding something from us
 - Balance honesty with age-appropriate and role-appropriate language
 - It's okay to say "I don't know"

Supporting Students and Families

- Boundaries
 - Be aware of your own internal reaction.
 - Own your feelings
 - Be aware of how your specific past affects your reaction so you don't project onto others.
 - Don't ask questions if you don't want an honest answer.
 - Know your limitations
 - Professional
 - Personal

Supporting Students and Families

- Help define emotions/give language to the specific struggle
 - Feelings lists
 - Validate the range of emotions someone may feel
 - Help students identify specific language for their experience instead of cliches or diagnoses
- Involve parents

When to refer

- Depends on your individual role and competency
- If you hear or see anything concerning, talk to your school counselor/social worker
 - Grades Dropping
 - Acting Out
 - Significant Weight Loss or Gain

What NOT to do:

- “It’ll be okay” It might not.
- “I know exactly how you feel” You might not.
- “At least...”
- “Everything happens for a reason” Even if you believe that, it isn’t always helpful to hear in crisis
- “You shouldn’t feel that way.”
- Don’t use unclear wording
- Don’t talk about someone in front of them

What you CAN say and do:

- “I’m so sorry this happened.”
- “What can I do to help?”
- Offer specifics
- KISS
- Only offer what is possible
- “That was such a [scary, hard, awful, sad, etc] situation”

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